

MEVIT1110 Grading Rubric (Autumn 2020)

Instructor: Annie Fee

Part A: Scene Analysis

The students do not need to make a clear thesis statement in their introduction and the text does not have to be structured in the same way as the essay in part B, with a clear topic sentence in each paragraph. What is important is the content/idea of what they are saying. If it is precise and clear and interesting and if their references to the film or episode supports their argument, then they will receive an A. Students are being tested on their interpretation of the scene. More weight should be given to the analysis of significant formal and stylistic elements (circa 50%) than to the relationship of the scene to the film or episode as a whole (circa 25%) and the relationship of the scene to the genre of the Western (circa 25%). That said, these three parts will logically overlap in their analysis and students do not have to structure their text by dividing their analysis into these three distinct parts. On the contrary, students should show how the three parts relate to each other and their analysis should form a cohesive whole in order to be within the A-C grade range. Although students may cite from the course readings in the scene analysis, they are not required to do so.

The key to a successful scene analysis essay is focus. An A-level essay may concentrate on how one or two formal elements perform one or two functions. It may also pose a clear, defensible argument regarding the function of the scene's formal elements and develop that argument over the course of the essay. An A-level essay will show a mastery of the technical terms for film analysis learnt during the semester (see glossary handout and textbook). A B-level essay may include a mix of interesting analysis and generalities and may include some errors in technical terms. A C-level essay may offer a catalogue of observations on the scene's formal elements and not make the necessary step from description to analysis. It may not consistently use the technical terms in the correct way. A D-level essay will not attempt to use the technical terms learnt in class and will be descriptive rather than analytical. An E-level essay may provide some generalities about the Western genre backed up by plot summary without engaging with the formal and stylistic elements of the scene.

We can understand the film analysis exam essay as involving the four steps listed below.

- 1) Description of the scene. What formal elements are used?
- 2) What meaning does these formal elements of cinematography, mise-en-scene, sound and editing produce?
- 3) How does the meaning produced in this scene fit in with the issues/themes/characters/settings/narrative of the film or episode as a whole?
- 4) How does the meaning produced in this scene fit in with the conventions of the western genre?

A D-level essay will not reach beyond step 1. A C-level essay may attempt steps 2, 3 and 4 but may not be completely successful. The ideas may not be fully developed or well-supported with formal elements. A B-level essay will engage with all steps and will be mostly

successful, but the analysis may be a little unclear or uninteresting at times. An A-level essay will engage with all four steps and do so convincingly with interesting analysis and ideas.

Part B: Students will answer one of the following two essay questions. All questions require them to reference at least three readings and to discuss at least two specific scenes.

Part B. Question 1.

1. Documentary is often discussed in terms of two forms: “categorical” and “rhetorical.” The first aims primarily to inform the viewer, while the second builds an argument in order to convince the viewer. Mireille Rosello writes that *The Gleaners and I* “is not a motherly lecture urging her children to eat up their porridge.” How does Agnès Varda manage to convince the spectator of a particular point of view without using the rhetorical form of documentary filmmaking?

An excellent essay will use examples from the film and readings to support their answer.

Summary of expected response to essay question one:

Students may find examples from the film and readings to argue that the film is an example of the “categorical form,” but may note that Varda includes aspects of the “rhetorical form” in a self-reflexive way. They may argue that Varda is able to convince the spectator of her point of view by engaging with several of the principal modes of documentary listed in the Bill Nichols reading: the *participatory mode*, the *performative mode*, the *poetic mode* and the *reflexive mode*, and to a lesser extent the *observational mode*. They may give examples from the film to illustrate how Varda follows particular modes. Students may disagree with the question and argue that Varda doesn’t, in fact, have a particular point of view to express in her documentary and that she seeks to inform rather than to persuade. They may also argue that she in fact does engage with the rhetorical form to a certain degree. As long as their essays are well-argued using examples from the film and the readings then there is room for several viewpoints.

Points that may be included in student essays:

The Gleaners and I is a portrait documentary film, based on real events, real characters and using real interviews. There are several different ways that students can articulate how Varda’s documentary style in *The Gleaners and I* diverts from the rhetorical form.

Students may note that Varda poses a problem, specifically that food is going to waste unnecessarily. She conveys something of the background to this problem, by tracing the history of gleaning and interviewing both gleaners and agricultural producers. She examines the severity of the problem, for example by showing the grapes rotting on the vineyard floor and the potatoes rotting in the field. In this way, Varda follows the conventions of many documentary films which adopt a problem/solution style as outlined by Nichols (21).

However, Varda does not organize her film around problem solving because she does not propose a recommendation or solution to the problem of food waste at the end of her film.

Students may explain the difference between the rhetorical form and the categorical form and argue why Varda's film fits into the "categorical" form (referring to *Film Art* 357-363). They may illustrate how Varda's use of the categorical form allows her to create parallels and draw comparisons between different types of gleaners. For instance, the categorical form allows her to elevate the gleaning practices of "the poor and the destitute" (i.e., homeless young people in Prades, the former truck driver living in the campervan, the potato gleaners volunteering for the *Restos du Cœur* charity, urban gleaners like Alain and Salomon) to the same status as the Michelin-star chef who gleans ingredients for his restaurant kitchen. The categorical form also allows her to place quite marginal recycling artists like Bodan Litnanski and Hervé in the same category as renowned French artist Louis Pons and US artist Sarah Sze.

Varda places these different categories of gleaners on equal footing by underlining the equivalency between gleaning for pleasure and gleaning out of necessity in her conversation with the lawyer in the cabbage patch scene. This equivalency is also achieved by the way in which Varda places both categories of gleaners in a long French historical tradition, revealed in her inclusion of artistic, literary and historical representations of gleaning, for example, archival footage of gleaners, the paintings *Des glaneuses* by Jean-François Millet, *La Glaneuse* by Jules Breton, *Les Glaneuses à Chambaudoine* by Pierre Hédouin and the poem by Joachim Du Bellay recited by the wine grower Jean Laplanche.

Although Varda does not directly adopt the "rhetorical" form, she does point to the convention of including experts as talking heads common to the rhetorical form of documentary with her inclusion of the film's three lawyers. This is one way in which Varda's film adopts the reflexive mode of documentary. The three lawyers that appear in *The Gleaners and I* introduce "discourses of sobriety" typical to documentary film as stated in the Nichols reading (36). In addition they represent the "arguments from source" typical of the rhetorical form of documentary. That is to say that they can be seen to be playing the role of "expert testimony" and "interviews with people assumed to be knowledgeable" which Bordwell and Thompson see as an essential element of the rhetorical form of documentary (364). However, the injection of the poetic mode into the scene with the lawyer in the cabbage patch undercuts the expectation of the expert wielding "power and knowledge." For example, the lawyer compares the red penal code book with the red of the tomatoes left after the harvest, and instead of being filmed in his office, his "testimony" is shot in a cabbage patch. The expert is thus complicit in the poetic and reflexive mode adopted by Varda. It is only the court magistrate prosecuting the young homeless teens for criminal activity who seriously assumes a "discourse of sobriety," causing Varda to undercut this expert's supposed power and knowledge by engaging with the participatory mode and remarking with humour, for example, how pretty her lawyer robes are.

Students may engage with how the hand-held digital camera functions to make meaning and develop themes in the film. Notably, by allowing Varda to get closer to her subjects, engaging with the participatory mode; by allowing her to reflect upon her film practice as "gleaning," engaging with the reflexive mode and by allowing her to film her own body's

signs of ageing, engaging with the performative mode and making the film characteristic of a “portrait documentary” (*Film Art* 355). Varda’s use of the reflexive and performative modes to explore themes of ageing are central to the film. Students may argue that she is creating a parallel between the gleaned vegetables and objects and her own body in the filmic rendering of her wrinkled hands and grey hair which has a defamiliarizing effect.

The relevant readings for this question are Bill Nichols, Mireille Rosello, and the textbook. The students should reference all three readings. If they reference only two of the readings they will not be able to achieve more than a C grade. If they reference only one essay they will not be able to achieve more than a D grade. If they do not reference any of the readings they will not be able to achieve more than an E grade. It is not required that students provide a full citation for each of the three readings; they may reference the reading by summarizing the main argument of the author in their own words.

If students reference two scenes from the film in a superficial way without engaging with the formal elements of the scenes then they will not be able to achieve more than a C grade. If they reference only one scene, but successfully analyse the formal elements using the correct technical terms then they can still achieve a C grade. If they do not reference any particular scene from the film but rely on vague descriptions and plot summary then they will not be able to achieve more than a D grade. Students are not required to formally reference films with in-text citations, nor are they expected to include a filmography.

Note to Graders:

There is not one correct way to answer this essay question. Care should be taken to award students for their original analysis of the film *The Gleaners and I* and to a lesser extent, their engagement with the three readings. In both essays the emphasis should be on aesthetic analysis in keeping with the learning objectives of MEVIT1110.

In Essay Question One, an A-level essay will develop some of the main points above in a well-argued essay with rigorous use of examples from the film and readings. An A-level essay will show a clear understanding of the rhetorical and categorical form of documentary and will examine how Varda’s film adopts several of the documentary modes outlined by Nichols. A B-level essay will develop some of the main points above but may not use examples from the film in a convincing manner. It may not show a full understanding of the readings. A C-level essay may discuss the modes of documentary in a superficial way without giving examples from the film and without showing a clear engagement with the readings. A D-level essay may give a superficial overview of how the film fits into the categorical form, rather than the rhetorical form without mentioning any of Nichols’ documentary modes. It may support this argument with plot summary and descriptions of scenes, but will not engage with the film in a meaningful way.

Note: Because the emphasis is on aesthetic analysis, it is possible that an essay will not include reference to Nichols’ documentary modes and still achieve a B grade, through original and thorough analysis of the film.

Part B. Question 2.

2. Rick Altman writes that “not all genre films relate to their genre in the same way or to the same extent.” In this essay, identify formal, stylistic, narrative and thematic elements of both *The Fits* and *The Ring* to make an argument about how the two films relate to the horror film genre in similar or different ways.

The Horror Genre

This question is asking students about how well both *The Fits* and *The Ring* fit the conventions of the horror genre. An excellent essay will include some of the following elements and use examples from the film and readings to support its answer.

Character Conventions of the Horror Genre: The Monster (Bordwell et al. 341)

Similarities: In both films the monster are shown to be “unknown to science” when scientific and medical experts are unable to explain the attacks. Both monsters are a violation of our normal sense of what is possible: Samara breaks through the television screen to attack her victims, Toni defies gravity by floating above the ground during the fits. Along the same lines, in each film figures of authority (police, parents, teachers) are either absent or unable to intervene effectively to stop the monster. In *The Fits* adults are kept at a distance through the use of selective focus and in *The Ring*, Rachel believes she has lifted the curse by freeing Samara, only to be reprimanded for her mistake by her son Aidan. In both films the monster has a horrifying emotional effect on those who witness it.

Differences: Samara is a more conventional monster in that she crosses the frontier between living and dead. However, this can also be seen as a similarity, for example, Beezy describes Madison being attacked by *The Fits* as acting “like a zombie.”

The Horror Setting

Differences: The horror genre usually includes “settings where monsters might lurk.” *The Ring* includes various horror settings, including Samara’s bedroom in the barn, the Morgan family home, the well, and the log cabin.

Similarities: Although *The Fits* does not include the conventional horror film settings, we are led to expect the appearance of something horrific in the gym scene in which Beezy asks Toni: “Did you hear that? I think someone’s in here.” Like Beezy’s zombie comment, this can be understood as the film referencing its own uncertain status as a horror film in a self-reflexive way.

Horror and the Body

Similarities: Samara is able to penetrate the body of her victims: Rachel finds an electrode and wire in her throat; Samara’s grip burns through the skin of Rachel and Aidan. Samara causes her victims to lose control of their bodies, for example the cyclical sketching of the

ring by Katie, Rachel and Aidan. The “monster” in *The Fits* causes the girls to lose control of their bodies.

Differences: Both films focus on the spectacle of the body caught up in intense emotion, in line with Linda Williams’ argument about “body genres.” In *The Ring* we see the distorted faces of Katie and Noah as bodies in extreme pain after Samara’s attack but in *The Fits* the girls’ bodies do not appear to be in the grip of horror. However, we can argue that both kind of attacks result in what Williams calls “ecstatic excesses [which] could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm – of the body beside itself.” Note: the students were not assigned the Linda Williams text and so do not need to provide a full reference. It is enough for them to reference the lecture PowerPoint where the above quote appeared.

In keeping with the theme of the body, students may explore how both films similarly feature the “monstrous female.” For example, *The Fits* are called a “boyfriend disease” and Legs has her first attack after becoming pregnant by Donte. The film can also be seen to draw parallels between menstruation and the mysterious seizures. In *The Ring* Anna Morgan’s infertility is closely tied to her adopted daughter’s monstrosity and the film is heavy with gestational symbolism, for example, the well as a barren womb and the well water that precedes Samara’s attacks as amniotic fluid. In addition, *The Ring* engages with gender confusion in the scene in which Noah’s nose bleeds over a medical report about Anna Morgan’s repeated miscarriages. This aspect of gender confusion is typical of the horror genre and is also present in *The Fits* in Toni’s transformation from tomboy boxer to feminine dancer.

Contagion

In *The Ring* the VHS curse is a contagion spread through technology which can be linked to the global reach of digital media at the turn of the millennium and the facility with which media can cross borders thanks to the Internet, facilitating file sharing and piracy (Wada-Marciano). The origins of the contagion cannot be located because the VHS does not carry an identifying code or “fingerprint,” an erasure symptomatic of the digital age as outlined by Wada-Marciano. This technological contagion is likened to other kinds of contagion in the film: Richard Morgan describes Rachel’s profession as journalist as spreading other people’s tragedy “like a sickness” and Samara’s former doctor speaks of her troubling behavior as a “cold” infecting the whole island. The film can also be seen as communicating anxiety about the Y2K bug (Worland). Anna Morgan’s infertility as a source of monstrosity is underlined by her connection to the animal world in her role as a “breeder” of horses and is emphasized in the unexplained sickness affecting the animals. In *The Fits*, the mysterious seizures are understood to be a contagion affecting only the female members of the dance team. In a sense, femininity can also be understood as a “contagion” infecting Toni once she enters the dance team.

The Horror Plot (Bordwell et al. 342)

Students may test the generic *syntax* of the horror genre to find that it does not completely fit the film *The Fits* or *The Ring*. In relation to this, students may discuss viewer expectations

and how the films both create surprise and suspense through their uneven relationship with the horror genre.

1) The monster's attack on normal life

The Ring begins with Samara's attack on Katie, a normal American high-school student in a normal suburban home. In *The Fits* the "monster" attacks the young coach Legs in a sports center during dance team practice.

2) The monster launches more attacks

In *The Fits*, girls on the dance team continue to have unexplained seizures after the "attack" on Legs. In *The Ring*, Samara continues to attack after killing her first high-school victims at the beginning of the film. The film defies expectations when Samara continues to kill, even after Rachel discovers her corpse in the well.

3) People in authority resist believing that the monster exists

In *The Fits* an expert from the water board is unable to explain the seizures. The monster suggests the limits of human knowledge when the expert admits, "I'm just a grad student." In *The Ring* Noah is represented as an expert in film and photography and at first he does not believe in the dangers of the cursed VHS tape.

4) There is a gradual discovery

In *The Ring* Noah gradually begins to believe in the dangers of the VHS tape after seeing his distorted image on the store surveillance screen and after taking multiple polaroid images of himself. *The Fits* plot diverts from the conventional horror plot at this point as we do not discover the source of the horror. Instead of the gradual discovery and attempt to destroy the monster, *The Fits* switches gears to follow the Cinderella plot pattern and the competition plot pattern, both conventional to the sports film (*Film Art* 348-351).

5) The characters try to destroy it

In *The Fits* the "monster" isn't destroyed. In this context of the horror film, heavy make-up is often used to signal a transformation (humans into werewolves or zombies, or humans possessed by demons as in *The Exorcist*). Placed in the horror syntax, Toni's transformation at the end of the film into a member of the dance team with glittering uniform and make-up suggests the horror about having to conform to certain gender norms. We can also see the final scene as sharing a concern of many horror films about the traditional categories of "normality."

The Ring shares this lack of narrative closure in the sense that Samara has not been destroyed. On the contrary, Rachel and Aidan are perpetuating the evil by making a copy of the VHS tape. Both films undercut the purposeful, goal-orientated agents of classical Hollywood cinema. Rachel is an active narrative agent in *The Ring*, but our expectations are undercut when she fails to break Samara's curse and then fails to save Noah after a suspenseful race-to-the-rescue scene. Both films share an open-endedness which is a key feature of the horror genre.

The High Level of Horror "genericity" in *The Ring*

Besides the elements listed above, other aspects of *The Ring* that may be addressed in student essays are societal anxieties about technology and the resulting social isolation, “technology as a medium for the horrific” (Wada-Marciano), the film’s representation of dysfunctional families, the home as the site of horror (with the VHS as a horrific home movie), and the film’s use of graphic matches.

The Lower Level of Horror “genericity” in *The Fits*

The Fits does not fit into a clearly defined genre category but rather engages with at least three film genres: the teen pic, the horror genre and the sports film. It is therefore an example of genre mixing. An excellent essay will point to how *The Fits* follows the horror genre syntax, but does not incorporate many of the semantic elements of the horror film (i.e., an identifiable monster). They may use the Rick Altman reading discussed in class and give an explanation of the meaning of the terms *semantic* and *syntactic* traits. An excellent essay will show how *The Fits* transfers the horror syntax of monster-victim onto a new set of semantic elements, i.e., a young girl joining a dance team.

They will outline the importance of the film’s mise-en-scene for engaging with multiple layers of genre. One example would be Toni’s golden nail varnish representing both her membership of a peer-group and sports team, but also her gender performance and her transformation into a gender-conforming “monster” or “zombie” typical of the horror film. Excellent essays will also point to the film’s self-reflexivity about the horror genre, for example when Beezy plays at being a zombie and when Toni scares Beezy in the darkened sports hall.

The relevant readings for this question are Rick Altman, Steve Neale, Rick Worland, Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, and the *Film Art* textbook. The students only have to reference three of these. If they reference only two of the readings they will not be able to achieve more than a C grade; if they reference only one reading they will not be able to achieve more than a D grade; if they do not reference any of the readings they will not be able to achieve more than an E grade. It is not required that students provide a full citation for each of the three readings; they may reference the reading by summarizing the main argument of the author in their own words.

Note on the Altman Reading:

Although the Altman reading is referenced in the essay question, it is not expected that this reading form the basis for students’ analysis. More weight should be given to their reading of the films and their attention to the formal and stylistic elements of particular scenes. However, an A-level essay will show a clear understanding of the *semantic* and *syntactic* elements of film genre by engaging with the Altman text. A B-level essay will cite Altman but may not illustrate a clear understanding of the terms *semantic* and *syntactic*. If the analysis is good and the ideas are clear and convincing then students can still achieve a C without mentioning Altman’s text in their essay. A D-level essay will not engage with the Altman reading at all.

If students reference two scenes from the film in a superficial way without engaging with the formal elements of the scenes then they will not be able to achieve more than a C grade. If

they reference only one scene, but successfully analyse the formal elements using the correct technical terms then they can still achieve a C grade. If they do not reference any particular scene from the film but rely on vague descriptions and plot summary then they will not be able to achieve more than a D grade. Students are not required to formally reference films nor are they expected to include a filmography.

In Essay Question Two, an A-level essay will develop some of the main points above in a well-argued essay with rigorous use of examples from the films and readings. An A-level essay will show a clear understanding of the conventions of the horror genre and will examine how *The Ring* and *The Fits* adopt these conventions in similar and different ways. A B-level essay will develop some of the main points above but may not use examples from the films in a convincing manner. It may not show a full understanding of the readings. A C-level essay may discuss horror film conventions in a superficial way without giving examples from the films and without showing a clear engagement with the readings. A D-level essay may give a superficial overview of how the films fit into the horror genre and may indicate a confused understanding of the readings. It may support this argument with plot summary, but will not engage with the films in a meaningful way.